THE SONG OF SONGS, COMMONLY CALLED THE SONG OF SOLOMON, OR, THE CANTICLE

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The Song of songs, commonly called the Song of Solomon, or, the Canticle by Albert Réville

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ALBERT RÉVILLE

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OR,

THE CANTICLE.

FROM THE FRENCH OF

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NOTE BY THE TRANSLATOR.

The following article which is now, with the permission of the Author, translated into English, first appeared in the *Revue de Théologie* of Strasbourg (1st Series, Vol. XIV.), and was afterwards published among the collected works of the Author. (See *Essais de Critique Religieuse, par Dr. Réville,* published by Joel Cherbuliez, Paris, *Nouvelle Edition,* 1869.)

In rendering the poem into English, the words of the ordinary English translation of the Bible have been used as far as applicable.

ERRATA.

Pages 1 and 37.—For "singing birds" read "songs."

Page 6.—Note.—For "Talmud" read "Targum."

Page 29.—Note.—For "portu" read "hortu."

Page 32, lines 8 and 11.—For "black" read "brown."

Page 49, line 10.—For "cannot" read "can only."

THE SONG OF SONGS.

I.

"Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away,
For lo, the winter is past,
The rain is over and gone,
The flowers appear on the earth,
The time of the singing birds is come,
And the voice of the turtle is heard in our land."

. . . . .

SUCH is a song of the spring-time, which a traveller along the western chain of the Lebanon, towards the end of the eighth century before our era, might have heard resounding among the pasturages of these green mountains. If he could foresee the future, and could have contemplated the destinies of the charming idyll, of which it forms part, his astonishment would have been great to see it transformed into a theological oracle, and furnishing a favourite theme of meditation to the most austere preachers of distant times. His astonishment would not be less if he could foresee the severity with which it might be treated by a posterity still more remote.

Nothing can be more extraordinary than the destiny of the book which we propose to study. On the one

hand, reverenced as a casket of most precious mystical pearls, on the other hand accused of defiling the Bible by its presence; for some, a pure fountain of holy contemplation, for others a folly and a scandal; for the former, a limpid and wholesome spring, at which they might refresh their faith; for the latter an inexhaustible source of profane mockery; the book is at once surrounded with the glory of an aureola, and with the contempt of ignominy. Let us trace a sketch of its history.

It is placed in the canonical list of the sacred books of the Hebrews between Job and Ruth, and, consequently makes part of the collection of sacred writings or *hagiographs* which were added to the biblical collection subsequently to the prophetical and historical documents. As its claim to be entered in the canonical list, it may be presumed that it had, by that time, come to be considered as a work of King Solomon, and that its allegorical interpretation as such gave it a religious value to which in its origin it had little pretext. These two causes operated mutually, and were necessary to each other. Unless the book were ascribed to Solomon, it is not likely that it would have been received into the Canon, and except for its allegorical interpretation at the time when the Canon was fixed, it would not have been ascribed to Solomon.

One thing is certain, that the book soon came to occupy an eminent position in the rabbinical teaching. Jerome informs us that among the Jews it was not

allowed to be read by persons under the age of thirty, not, as we might be inclined to think, on account of its dangers to the juvenile imagination, but on account of the theological profundities which it presented for contemplation, and which required the maturity of age to be adequately appreciated. The beginning of the book of Genesis, and the beginning and end of the book of Ezekiel, were for the same reason objects of the same precautions.* In the Talmud we find the eminent Rabbi Akiba expressing himself in these words:—"The whole world is not worth the day "on which the Canticle was given to Israel. All the "writings of the Canon are holy, but the Canticle is the "most holy of holies."† The same rabbi tells us that the only work of Solomon which has caused controversy is the Ecclesiastes.

However, the terms of the assertion of the Rabbi Akiba causes some suspicion that the unanimity as to the Canticle was not so absolute as he alleges, and in fact, in the same Talmudic treatise, we find Rabbi Jose state that the "Ecclesiastes does not defile the hands, "but that the Canticle is the subject of disputes."

In general, the Canticle when allegorized, becomes too easily the subject of those subtle interpretations to which the rabbinical school was so passionately addicted, in order to maintain prolonged argumentation. In such circumstances, reasons which otherwise would have tended to counteract belief in the Divine inspiration of the book, came to corroborate that belief. In

* Hieron. Op. Praef. ad Ezech. † Mischna, Tract, Judaim. iii. 5.